

The Global Information Environment and 21st Century Warfare: Targeting Public Opinion in the 5th Dimension

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If terrorists throughout the world and insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan understand one thing, they understand that American public opinion is a major center of gravity. The term center of gravity (COG) in the military sense is very similar to the term in the scientific sense. The center of gravity is the point in an object where its mass is concentrated. From the military perspective, when we identify and attack our enemies' COGs, we are attacking those points where they have massed their force or their capabilities to exercise their will. Put another way, if we destroy the enemy's COG, his force, capability, and morale will crumble.

The U.S. Armed Forces cannot fight and win wars without the support of the American public. If terrorists and insurgents can effectively influence American public opinion, they can affect our strategy, operations, and tactics. If they do so, they have, in effect, infiltrated and disrupted our decision-making process, forcing us to become reactive and lose the initiative. To accomplish this, our enemies do not need to engage in prolonged conventional confrontations (as in the streets of Fallujah, Iraq, or the villages of Afghanistan). All they have

to do is stage periodic, horrific acts of terrorism that become media events.

Therefore, we see improvised explosive devices, beheadings, ambushes on civilian targets, attacks on symbols of American power, and suicide bombers. Terrorists take a wheelchair-bound hostage and dump him overboard at sea, bomb a poorly-protected Marine barracks, drag a naked, dead Soldier through the streets of Mogadishu, and crash jetliners into our skyscrapers, knowing that, in each instance, video footage of their depredations will be shown over and over again. This makes for great press and even better ratings, and it erodes American public support and morale.

Since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), periodic heated public debates have broken out over the U.S. Government's use of certain tactics during information operations (IO) campaigns. In one instance, a public outcry led to the closure of the Department of Defense's (DOD's) Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). In another, DOD was hotly criticized for contracting with the Lincoln Group and Rendon Group, self-described business-intelligence companies, to conduct public relations on its behalf in Iraq. Words matter. Whether it's called IO, public relations, public diplomacy, or propaganda, Americans and the American media are sensitive to any perceived management of the information they receive.

Syndicated columnist and political analyst Mark Shields stresses that "strategic communications" must be based on in-depth, quality research and knowledge of the opponent and target audience.¹ Democratic pollster Fred Yang adds, "The media must be used for the purpose of informing, motivating, and mobilizing" the public to take an intended action.²

Soon after 9/11—on 30 October 2001, to be exact—DOD stood up OSI to take the lead on a global IO campaign. Within four months, the office's intent and motives had received so much negative media publicity that DOD closed it. However, it was only the name of the office that was given a conspicuously awkward and speedy farewell. Other offices within DOD have the same mission and purpose, including the Office of Global Communications, the Information Awareness Office, the Information Operations Task Force, and the Counter-Disinformation/Misinformation Team (also known as the Counter-Information Team). The point here is that information operations are a legitimate and effective form of warfare. Not to use them aggressively and relentlessly is to cede to the enemy a strategy, operation, and tactic that should be the main effort in the GWOT.

Background and History

Information operations are strategies, operations, tactics, techniques, and procedures taken to affect and influence an

opponent's and others' "decision-making process, information, and information systems," while, at the same time, "protecting one's own information and information systems."³ Information superiority is defined as "the operational advantage derived from the ability to collect, process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information, while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same."⁴

Examples of IO include, but are not limited to, operations as simple as pamphlet drops over targeted foreign population centers to warn them of impending violence and military operations or to apply public pressure on the adversary, targeted military, and foreign governments to seek a non-violent, diplomatic resolution of grievances. Pamphlets may provide warnings, recommend civilian courses of action, or even threaten impending doom to enemy combatants.

Initially implemented at the beginning of the cold war to "promote democratic values and institutions by disseminating factual information and ideas," and credited with playing a major part in the downfall of the Soviet Union, such media as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Afghanistan, and Radio Free Iraq are examples of IO that target foreign audiences. Sponsors include the United States Information Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency.

In today's global communications environment of 24-hour news networks and worldwide interconnectedness, the U.S. Government must consider our domestic population a target audience. The word "target" may make critics wince, but there are targets we must protect from the enemy, just as there are targets we must destroy. U.S. public opinion is a target that we must protect because it is vulnerable to outside, subversive influences.

For better understanding, we must put IO into a historical context. The Romans pioneered information operations through edicts, writings, and art to regulate, govern, and control the Roman Empire. The term "propaganda" originated in 1622 during the Thirty Years War when, under the leadership of Pope Gregory XV, the Catholic Church founded the "Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith" (*sacra congregatio christiano nomini propagando*)—the Jesuits—to spread Catholicism and regulate religious communications.⁵

The U.S. media and its influence on American public opinion evolved during the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. As Lawrence of Arabia observed in 1920, "The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armory of the modern commander."⁶ The influence the media has had on U.S. public opinion was particularly evident during the Spanish-American War. William Randolph Hearst, the owner of the Hearst

chain of newspapers, was well aware of the media's power to influence. During the initial stages of the Spanish-American War, Hearst discovered that the level of violence many in the United States believed would eventually lead to war did not exist. Hearst is credited with telling his journalist in Cuba, "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war" so that his chain could sell more papers.⁷ The media has a target audience in everything it produces. This is an example of the media targeting the government.

Modern American IO and public relations have their roots in the World War I-era "Committee for Public Information," whose members included journalist Walter Lippmann and psychologist Edward Bernays (Sigmund Freud's nephew). The committee coined the terms "group mind" and "engineering consent" and is credited with laying the foundation for the modern public relations industry and the use of information operations as a method of warfare.⁸

During World War II, America engaged in an epic struggle with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the first axis of evil, and newspapers and radio were the U.S. public's primary sources of information. Journalists were embedded within military units; they even wore U.S. military-issue uniforms.⁹ In effect, the military and the media were in voluntary collusion to reassure Americans and to nurture support for the war effort. Both knew

America would not succeed in the war without the support of U.S. public opinion.

Voluntary cooperation between the military and the media began to erode following World War II and reached a low point during the Vietnam war. As technology advanced, journalists became more mobile, independent, and global in perspective, and did not rely so much on the government for information. Journalists who filed stories from the frontlines during World War II brought U.S. public awareness out of a cocoon. America and the media became less isolationist in nature and more international in outlook.

World War II was an example of conventional warfare on a grand scale. Conventional forces defeated the enemy, adversarial governments surrendered, and foreign populations cooperated with victorious military forces and obeyed their orders. The Vietnam war was the reverse. It provides a classic example of low-intensity conflict or guerilla warfare in which the guerilla force cannot succeed conventionally and, therefore, relies on the information environment to gain advantage and build public support before it confronts enemy forces in open battle.¹⁰

During the Vietnam war, the relationship between the government and the media began to disintegrate. Critics of U.S. efforts say a failed DOD public relations strategy damaged the military's credibility. The media interpreted the practice of

publicizing enemy body counts and hiding embarrassing incidents of political and military failures as attempts to cover up more serious problems. The Watergate scandal further corroded the media-government relationship. The media reached a level of near paranoia in its distrust of the government and the military. It could not believe that either organization would provide timely and honest information, facts, and statistics. As a result, suspicion, distrust, and dismay befell both sides. The military blamed the media for its failures in Vietnam, and the media clearly did not subscribe to Churchill's belief that there must be a "bodyguard of lies" to protect U.S. interests.¹¹

The reasons for this failure in cooperation are many. First and foremost, the media resisted what it perceived as an attempt to manage and manipulate it in order to foster support for the war. From the perspective of the U.S. National Command Authority, the failure to wage information warfare was a failure to command.

Such friction between the government and the "fourth estate" might be necessary in a liberal-democratic society. As Victoria Clarke, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, has said, "a very healthy tension" exists between military and the media.¹² But such open antagonism between the two estates ultimately benefits neither, and it puts our Nation in peril.

News media reporters, and print journalists in particular, are justifiably concerned with maintaining credibility, legitimacy, and public trust in their independent reporting. By contrast, the government and the military see the media as a vehicle to use to communicate a message to the American people and the international community. Put another way, in the interest of national security and to protect the lives and safety of U.S. military forces, the government and military seek to manage the margins of messages and information that enter the public domain.

Today, our information war against America's enemies is global. It is waged in the villages of Kandahar, on the streets of Baghdad, on the worldwide web of the Internet, and in 24-hour newsroom operations of every major media corporation world-wide. Fighting the IO conflict is not a military undertaking, but a political war.

Paul Bremer, former chief administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, knew how important it was to make not only Iraqis but also Americans and U.S. allies aware of Iraq's progress.¹⁴ We must fight the IO conflict not just in the environments and minds of our enemies and targeted foreign audiences, but in the hometowns and living rooms of the United States as well.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has observed that "our enemies are operating 24/7 across every time zone [and we are not]. That is an unacceptably dangerous deficiency."¹⁵ To fight in this new dimension, the United States must engage adversaries globally, 24/7, in peacetime, in times of conflict, and in times of war. The United States must accept reality and engage across the full spectrum of warfare.

Accepting Reality

In many ways, information operations are not much different from political, commercial, and private public relations, media, and marketing campaigns. If the Republican and Democratic National Committees, Coca-Cola, Nike, and McDonald's can do it, why can't our government use the same successful methods to target many of the same audiences? Is it because we are a liberal democracy that IO seems to be so distasteful? Is IO too reminiscent of the propaganda of oppressive regimes in world history? Or is it just an easy target the media can use to stir up controversy?

Some military observers suggest that information operations are a form of marketing. In fact, there are many similarities. In IO, military planners use a targeting process characterized by the "decide, detect, deliver, and assess" cycle. Marketing and advertising agencies use a similar cycle: "discover, define, design, and deliver." Marketing and IO also seek the same

outcome: to produce physical and psychological responses.

Advertising is a form of propaganda; marketing is a form of IO.¹⁶

Is commercialism infecting how the United States wages information operations? Many academics and professional journalists argue that hyper-commercialism is rampant within the media and press. Indeed, journalists know this to be true as well. As Journalist Kathy Kiely said in a lecture at Georgetown University, the media openly panders to the "wants" of its audience instead of its needs and "commercial pressure drives the news."¹⁷

Many believe that major media conglomerates are consumed with profits, profitability, and market share.¹⁸ Media organizations are commercial enterprises with little, if any, fiduciary responsibility to the public. Why shouldn't the government conclude that it is logical and reasonable to influence the media's actions, coverage, and product instead of passively depending it to be "fair and balanced" in its coverage of the GWOT?

Some political science writers believe the values of journalism are fundamentally at odds with those of government. Author Thomas E. Patterson says the press routinely distorts issues by focusing on controversy, scandal, conflict, and public opinion polls. Patterson argues that the press is not equipped to give order and direction to political coverage. They are

miscast, he says; the public expects the media to do what they are incapable of doing.¹⁹ If this is true, shouldn't government representatives work within this flawed paradigm in the interest of national goals and objectives?

Noted journalist Jack Germond argues that journalists should not care about "making the world safer for democracy" and the media "should not strive to fulfill some pseudo-civic purpose other than to report the truth responsibly."²⁰ Businesspersons, politicians, and political campaigners understand this. The American public and government should also understand and accept this reality, and either engage the media in an environment of commercialism or circumvent the media altogether.

If the U.S. Government and DOD are to execute our Nation's wars efficiently, effectively, and successfully, they must adopt aggressive IO strategies and tactics. If they are to be honest brokers, ensuring timely, accurate dissemination of appropriate information to the public at the appropriate time, they must protect and nurture their credibility. Not to do so would be irresponsible and pose a threat to the lives of military service members and our ability to ensure national security. In this interest, we must regard the full spectrum of IO (public relations, public diplomacy, public affairs, marketing and advertising, psychological operations, and propaganda) as

essentially the same. They all have the same goal: to influence target audiences to make decisions beneficial to America.

The War of Ideas

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Gulf War I, Americans took "a vacation from history," as *The Weekly Standard's* Noemie Emery put it. The U.S. public was devoted to its own prosperity, unmindful of the growing threat of international terrorism. After 9/11, Americans realized that while they might be physically safe from foreign invasion by conventional armies, they were vulnerable to attacks by other means.

Americans think of war in a physical sense, but war is a product of its times, and Americans are behind the times. Terrorists are confronting the United States in an information environment.²¹ It is to be expected: given a choice, terrorists will choose the path of least resistance: they will attack the softest target. Terrorists have taken our freedoms—specifically, the freedom of the press—and turned them against us. In the GWOT, our very freedoms can lead to failure. The information environment, a sacred arena for liberal democracies and the freedoms they espouse, is composed of the full spectrum of international media, its conduits, and content. The fact that nearly every American has a television (sometimes one in each room) and a growing number of Americans have Internet access

gives terrorists the ability to reach into our homes and offices to spread their messages of hate and fear. They can affect our most basic behaviors: how we travel, communicate, interact, educate ourselves, and vote.

Retired Army officer Ralph Peters believes the U.S. Government and DOD are building a military that thinks victory depends on technology and transformation, that unmanned machines can replace Soldiers on the battlefield, and that America's technological innovations and capabilities are changing the way we fight. However, according to Peters, the battles of the future will actually be epic battles of ideas, will, faith—and, admittedly, flesh—and we will fight them for decades to come.²²

In U.S. Army doctrine, information operations are employed purely as a secondary effort to support the main physical, kinetic effort. However, in the GWOT, "terror" is an ethereal concept, tactic, and strategy, and information operations—the "war of ideas"—must be our main effort. Terrorists understand this: "Terrorists act in the physical environment not to make tactical gains in the physical environment, but to wage a strategic battle in the information environment; therefore the physical environment enables many of the activities in the information environment to occur."²³ This is why we should be concerned about "winning the battle and losing the war" and continued comparisons of Iraq to Vietnam. If the U.S. military

and, by extension, the U.S. Government, fight only in the physical environment, they only fight a tactical battle, as if one hand is tied. In the GWOT, the United States has unapproachable air superiority and dominance. It must now achieve and maintain information superiority and dominance.

The "epic battle" of today has a battlefield, and it is a virtual one. That battle is being fought in the hearts, minds, and media of American society and foreign societies. We must exploit the information front. Opportunities present themselves, but unfortunately, and probably for political reasons, DOD has shied away from a public debate on this topic after the OSI debacle, preferring a tangential approach.

In the minds of many, contracting out IO efforts to consulting firms such as the Lincoln Group and Rendon Group seems to be a perfectly justifiable course of action. After all, this is an accepted business and political campaign practice. Private lobbying and public relations firms have much more latitude in how they ply their trade and, from a legal perspective, the use of contractors distances the U.S. from any controversial IO methods and performance.²⁴

Political consultant Thomas J. O'Donnell believes that "all [political] techniques are legitimately transferable to public diplomacy campaigns" and that "engineering consent" is not diabolical.²⁵ He believes that success in IO involves three

crucial imperatives: control the dialogue; pre-empt attacks; and counterattack relentlessly. When an organization controls the message successfully, it achieves an advantage that it must then vigorously defend. O'Donnell urges his clients to be proactive because they cannot depend on the media to transmit their messages. "You have to do what is necessary to win. The risks are too high to risk losing," he implores.

DOD must focus on "developing, coordinating, deconflicting, and monitoring the delivery of timely, relevant, and effective messages to targeted international audiences."²⁶ Government IO goals, objectives, themes, and messages must be continually refined, updated, and adapted to counter adversary actions and challenges in a very fluid, dynamic, multi-dimensional conflict.

Secretary Rumsfeld, who understands the critical nature of IO, lashed out at reporters in the wake of OSI's demise, saying: "Fine, you want to savage this thing [OSI], fine. I will give you the corpse. There is the name. [OSI]. You can have the name, but I'm going to keep doing every single thing that needs to be done, and I have."²⁷ Rumsfeld observes that the media "seem to demand perfection from the government but do not apply the same standard to the enemy or even sometimes to themselves."

Journalists reply that they are merely being balanced in their reporting and imply that "balance" is always a good thing.²⁸

However, experienced journalists know that sometimes balanced coverage is unfair.²⁹

Nothing New

Many military leaders and government officials do not understand why U.S. IO is so controversial. President Ronald Reagan, the "Great Communicator," employed IO successfully. President Bill Clinton's "quick response" strategy crushed every attack by his opponent with an immediate barrage of rhetoric.³⁰ Call it "spinning," campaigning, or IO, but both presidents sought to control "the message" that permeated the media. Information operations are a form of public relations. Why do the media and the public admire the public relations skills of politicians and abhor the same skills when military officers use them in the interest of national security?

Perhaps precedents set during World War II, Vietnam and the cold war have led us to regard propaganda as a dubious method of warfare. Because of this false rationale, the media and the public seem to regard government IO as "lying" and have the romantic notion that democratic governments and countries at war should not do such things. Conservative and liberal special interest groups, advocates, bloggers, and "spinmeisters" are free to engage in IO, but doing so is taboo for the U.S. military and government.

John McArthur, publisher of *Harpers*, seems to agree that IO should be off-limits to the government: "Lying from under the cover of anonymity to a [public audience] is merely public relations."³² The *Los Angeles Times* reports, "The military's effort to disseminate propaganda in the Iraqi media is taking place even as U.S. officials are pledging to promote democratic principles."³² Both McArthur and the *Times's* writer imply that public relations and IO are fundamentally opposed to democracy. But they are not; they are a part of democracy, a great experiment and human endeavor that is not a sacred cow, but a goal to fight for using all available means. To suggest otherwise is naïve, hypocritical, and dangerous.

The Marketplace of Ideas

Alexis de Tocqueville, a very insightful observer of American media during America's formative years, describes how "the influence of the liberty of the press does not affect political opinions alone, but it extends to all the opinions of men, and it modifies customs as well as laws."³³ In other words, the "press effect" is real. The media might deny it vehemently and protest that "they do not form public opinion, they merely reflect it," but this is simply not true. Those who subscribe to this logic deny reality.

Tocqueville lamented that he could see no tenable position "between the complete independence and the entire subjection of

the public expression of opinion" ³⁴ He correctly observed that any protest or prosecution of the media for the abuses it perpetrated only brought attention and legitimacy to the abuses. Tocqueville concluded, "In order to enjoy the inestimable benefits which the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils which it engenders." ³⁵ The press is a necessary evil.

We note today that the hyper-commercialism of the media has affected public discourse. Tocqueville reminds us that this is no new trend at all: "In America three quarters of the enormous sheet which is set before the reader are filled with advertisements, and the remainder is frequently occupied by political intelligence or trivial anecdotes." ³⁶

Is it possible that we are amusing ourselves to death, as Neil Postman postulated in 1985? ³⁷ Should we believe that unelected media representatives with no legal or formal fiduciary responsibility to the public have the best interests of the United States in mind, or should we believe that they aim to please their corporate owners, sponsors, and advertisers by ensuring a competitive and profitable market-share? Tocqueville would submit that the latter is a greater likelihood. If so, then the government must enter the marketplace of ideas and communicate its goals and objectives to its domestic and international audiences. But how?

What to Do

The military and other offices and agencies outside of DOD must become more proactive. In fact, the IO war would be better waged outside of DOD. DOD is miscast as the lead agency in this effort. The State Department's Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs should be the tip of the international IO spear, and the White House Office of Communications should lead domestic public relations efforts. The General Accounting Office recommends that the U.S. Government formulate a comprehensive interagency strategic framework and plan for public diplomacy.³⁸

In 2003, DOD produced a comprehensive IO roadmap outlining how to move forward in the IO arena. This roadmap, while good for DOD, must be adapted and then adopted government-wide. I have adapted the following recommendations from the declassified version of the "Information Operation Roadmap" approved by Secretary Rumsfeld on 30 October 2003.³⁹ I propose we apply them across the government instead of solely within the DOD.

The U.S. Government should—

- O Make it a policy to engage in IO activities worldwide to the maximum extent permitted by law, while lobbying for the removal of current restrictions and limitations that prevent a global approach to targeting adversaries, non-adversaries, and domestic

and international audiences. This would most likely require a "Presidential Finding" and cooperation from Congress.

- O Establish clear IO definitions with policies that outline authorities and boundaries for execution. Synchronize public affairs and psychological operations to support domestic and international IO strategy. Ensure an appropriate relationship between these activities, one that helps achieve the U.S. public diplomacy strategy.

- O Create a long-term, comprehensive, interagency IO strategy led from the White House for government-wide communication to both domestic and international audiences. Ensure accountability and visibility of IO resources.

- O Establish measurable IO themes, goals, and objectives based on providing timely, truthful strategic communications where appropriate while retaining deception, misdirection, and misinformation in the IO lexicon and arsenal.

- O Continue to increase funding for IO efforts, including domestic programs. Develop a trained and educated workforce with language and cultural proficiency and expertise for all target audiences. Fully fund, man, and equip those offices directed to engage in IO activities. Increase capital investment to fund and staff IO offices and equip them with the most advanced communications capabilities.

O Develop IO as a core competency within government operations. The government's message is too important to rely on private industry to disseminate it. Invest in public service announcements, advertisements, and infomercials. Adopt comprehensive, proactive, and coherent messages that facilitate the achievement of U.S. Government goals and objectives. Ensure synchronization of political messages and military operations to foster public support.

O Develop partnerships and advisory councils and continue to contract with private-industry public relations firms, the motion picture industry, and media conglomerates. Governmental offices and agencies outside of DOD should execute this initiative.

O Develop "off-shore" capabilities to influence target audiences globally. The State Department and other governmental agencies with overt and covert operational capabilities should execute this initiative.

O Increase U.S. Government-sponsored domestic media, including enhanced Internet, print, radio, network, and cable television capabilities. Use the British Broadcasting Company, the Armed Forces Network television stations, and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper as examples. Make sure these media are widely available and aggressively marketed domestically.

O Maintain an aggressive "media-embed" strategy that provides increased access to local, hometown media outlets. Develop and grow a grassroots media network that can potentially circumvent traditional establishment outlets.

O Begin permanent, continuous, and unremitting overt and covert offensive campaigns against enemy IO capabilities and execute them relentlessly during peacetime and war. Develop IO target sets that support full-spectrum engagement with both kinetic and non-kinetic options.

O Increase targeting of governments and entities that support, facilitate, and provide sanctuary for the abrogation of women's rights.

O Obscure the line between humanitarian assistance and military assistance to support U.S. goals and objectives.

O Attack the terrorists' credibility and morality. Do not let terrorists hide behind religion. Humiliate, shame, and disgrace them by showing how their violent actions contradict their religion's code of conduct.

In order to defeat terrorism, we must make terrorists fear our intentions, capabilities, and will. "Fair and balanced" is a good TV network slogan, but a suicidal military maxim. Successful warriors gain and exploit advantages; they do not intend to fight fair. The U.S. Government cannot defeat terrorism by responding to it in a fair and balanced way. The

strategic management of information will not undermine our democratic values.

Americans must not cower and flinch in the face of terrorism. We must maintain our deep, long-term resolve. The United States cannot conduct strategic IO while it tries to win an international popularity contest. Nor can it win over the unwinnable hearts and minds of a hostile population. We must accept this reality and wage an uncompromising war on terrorism that never declares "mission accomplished," that denies the enemy sanctuary and satisfaction during times of war and peace, and that forces him to live in terror himself.⁴⁰

The U.S. Government must maintain its credibility and pursue an aggressive strategic communications strategy. These two objectives are not mutually exclusive. However, once credibility is lost, no communications strategy will effectively restore it. Strategic communications and information operations must strive to provide the American public and media with the information they appropriately need to know, while encouraging the debate on constitutional claims to a right to know, as defined by today's media.

We cannot accept Tocqueville's premise that "in order to enjoy the inestimable benefits which the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils which it engenders." To accept this premise would be to surrender to

our adversaries in the fifth dimension of warfare. To fight our adversaries and protect America, we must use credible and legitimate methods that lie "between the complete independence and the entire subjection of the public expression of opinion."

Notes

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Bio

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